

FISH and WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: November 14, 2013

Agenda Item: Black-Footed Ferret Augmentation to UL Bend on the CMR Refuge

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Approve

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 minutes

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Background

Efforts to restore black-footed ferrets in Phillips County began in 1994, when a final rule was published designating black-footed ferrets in north-central Montana as experimental-nonessential, which provides landowners protections from regulatory impacts of the ESA. Since that time, recovery efforts have been beset by challenges. While efforts in Phillips County have not been as successful as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and others would like, it remains an important part of the overall black-footed ferret recovery strategy. With the exception of a recent release of 32 animals at Ft. Belknap, the UL Bend population is the only black-footed ferret population remaining in Montana, and one of only 20 in North America.

Seven ferrets were located during surveys in April, and several litters were expected to be produced during the summer. However, only six ferrets could be located during September surveys and only three could be found in October. Without population supplementation, the likelihood of this population persisting is very low. USFWS believes that a supplemental release of 15-20 captive-reared black-footed ferrets this year would allow the UL Bend population to persist in the short term. Maintenance of this population will allow for future research on sylvatic plague management and potential implementation of a financial incentive program for private landowners to encourage the conservation of black-tailed prairie dogs. Trials on the effectiveness of a plague vaccine are currently underway in Montana and efforts to secure funding for a landowner incentive program are ongoing by the Natural Resources Conservation Service and the Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Implementation Team Executive Committee.

Public Involvement Process & Results

Public comment was solicited and collected during completion of the original 1992 Environmental Assessment that allowed for ferret reintroductions into this area. This assessment covers any augmentation of the UL Bend experimental non-essential population of ferrets and because there are no significant new issues or concerns on the refuge landscape, no new public comment is necessary. FWP met with Phillips and Valley county Commissioners regarding this augmentation.

Alternatives and Analysis

Not allowing augmentation of this ferret population will likely result in local population extinction. Not having any public land population of ferrets in Montana may make it more difficult to participate ongoing ferret conservation discussions and future delisting of the species within the species' range.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

FWP recommends the augmentation of this population to provide for future research and to contribute to the range-wide population of ferrets with a goal of delisting.

Proposed Motion

I move the Commission approve the transplant of up to 20 black-footed ferrets to augment the existing experimental non-essential population at UL Bend.